


10-1-1981

## The Present Indicative in Matthew 19:9

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### Recommended Citation

Osburn, Carroll D. (1981) "The Present Indicative in Matthew 19:9," *Restoration Quarterly*: Vol. 24 : No. 4 , Article 1.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol24/iss4/1>

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# Restoration Quarterly

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## The Present Indicative in Matthew 19:9

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In recent discussion of the interpretation of Matthew 19:9, it has been ventured by some that *moichatai* must mean "continues to commit adultery" because the present indicative necessitates continuous action. That understanding seems to be based upon a statement by Burton<sup>1</sup>: "The most constant characteristic of the Present Indicative is that it denotes action in progress." As is well known, though, "mood" constitutes the most difficult aspect of Greek syntax,<sup>2</sup> and Stagg<sup>3</sup> and Greenlee<sup>4</sup> have called attention to a number of serious abuses of Greek syntax in biblical exegesis. Accordingly, it is imperative that careful distinctions in linguistic usage be observed lest the appeal to syntax result in misinformation. With regard to Matthew 19:9, the appeal to the present indicative to establish that *moichatai* must necessarily refer to continuity is not cogent based as it is upon imprecise understanding of Greek mood distinctions.

Observing that in the present indicative no clear distinction can be drawn between ongoing action and so-called "punctiliar" action as is possible in the imperfect and aorist indicative, Robertson notes, "it is not wise therefore to define the pres. ind. as denoting 'action in progress' like the imperf. as Burton does, for he has to take it back on p. 9 in the discussion of the 'Aoristic Present,' which he calls a 'distinct departure

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\*Editor's note: Our readers have long expressed an interest in studies in Biblical languages reflecting on crucial, ongoing discussions in the church. We are pleased to announce that Carroll D. Osburn has consented to provide such studies on a regular basis. We commend Professor Osburn to you as a judicious and meticulous scholar.

<sup>1</sup>E. deWitt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (3rd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), p. 912.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Stagg, "The Abused Aorist," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 92 (1972): 222-231.

<sup>4</sup>J. Harold Greenlee, "The Importance of Syntax for the Proper Understanding of the Sacred Text of the New Testament," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 44 (1972): 131-146.

from the prevailing use of the present tense to denote an action in progress.' In sooth, it is no 'departure' at all. The idiom is as old as the tense itself and is due to the failure in the development of separate tenses for punctiliar and linear action in the ind. of present time."<sup>5</sup> In explaining the difficulty of relegating the present indicative to "linear" action, Turner<sup>6</sup> states, "In order to say I *walk* without reference to time, English can be unambiguous; not so Greek. It must use the indicative of the present. . . . Thus in Greek one seldom knows apart from the context whether the pres. indic. means *I walk* or *I am walking*. In other moods than indic., of course, the problem does not arise. . . . One must always bear that in mind for exegesis."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while it is true that in moods other than the indicative the present tense denotes continuing action, in the indicative mood itself no distinction can be drawn from the mood between the action which is continuing and that which is not. By way of analogy, the familiar present indicative in 1 John 3:9 *hamartian ou poiei*, "does not continue to sin," derives its continuity not from the mood, but from the following *hamartanein*, a present infinitive which cannot mean other than "is not able to continue in sin." Similarly, in 1 John 3:8, *hamartanei*, a present indicative, is used to mean that "the Devil continues to sin," but the continuity involved derives not from the present indicative, but from the attendant *ap arches*, "from the beginning." Too, 1 John 1:7 is understood correctly to mean "the blood of Jesus his Son continues to cleanse us from each sin," but any attempt to base that continuity upon the present indicative is an abuse of Greek syntax. In this, as in the other examples, it is the context which must settle the matter of whether continuity is involved.<sup>8</sup>

The indicative mood is normally employed in all Indo-European languages to denote a simple statement of fact, but it has a wide variety of uses, such as the present of customary action, present of general truth, conative present, futuristic present, oracular present, historical present,

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<sup>5</sup>A *Grammar of the Greek NT*, p. 864. A. Thumb, *Handbook of the Modern Greek Vernacular* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912), p. 119, illustrates the development of such a distinction in modern Greek with *pegaino*, "I keep going," and *pago*, "I go."

<sup>6</sup>N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), III, p. 60.

<sup>7</sup>Thus *dzeteite*, "keep on seeking," in Matthew 6:33 and Colossians 3:1 cannot be cited as parallel to the usage in Matthew 19:9, for those are present imperatives, not present indicatives. Such inattention to Greek mood distinctions would constitute an abuse of Greek syntax.

<sup>8</sup>See Steve McKenzie, "The Church in 1 John," *Restoration Quarterly*, 19 (1976): 211-216.



annalistic present, present for perfect, and past and present combined.<sup>9</sup> Robertson<sup>10</sup> notes that the most frequent use of the present indicative is the "descriptive present," the simple statement of a fact with no specific reference to continuity. The "iterative present," involving repetition, is not so frequent. Of the more than 700 instances of the present indicative in Matthew's Gospel, the vast majority of occurrences are "descriptive" with no continuity under consideration, as 3:11 where *baptidzo*, "I baptize," connotes no repetitive or continual action but is merely a declarative statement. Similarly, in 8:25 *apollumetha*, "we perish," can hardly refer to a continual perishing, and in 20:30, where, when the blind men heard that Jesus "passed by," *paragei* must not be understood to mean that he continued to pass by. In such instances, the point at issue is not whether the action could conceivably involve continuity, but whether the present indicative necessitates continuity. Certain instances of which there are several in Matthew, actually prohibit any notion of continuity, as in 13:14 where a certain man sells his possessions and "buys," *agoradzei*, a field, but it cannot be said that the man kept on buying the field. Such "aoristic presents" are a common usage in NT Greek, as in Matthew 13:44<sup>11</sup> and 26:63.<sup>12</sup> Other uses of the present indicative with no reference to continual action are the 93 occurrences of the "historic present" in Matthew,<sup>13</sup> such as 26:40 *heuriskei*, "he finds them sleeping," and 27:38 *staurountai*, "they crucify him between two."

In only a few instances does the present indicative in Matthew involve continuity, as 15:23 where the Canaanite woman, *kradzei*, "keeps crying out" for Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. However, in most of these instances, it is difficult to envisage the intended continuity as inherent within the present indicative, for even in 15:23 the continuity is evident in the disciples' response to her continual pleading, which derives from the imperfect *ekradzen* in verse 22. In 17:15 where a youth is said to "often fall into the fire" the continuity is brought to bear in *pollakis*, "often," rather than in the present indicative. Even in such cases as 10:38, where one is admonished to take up his cross and *akolouthei*,

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<sup>9</sup>H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 421-423, who notes on p. 414 that "the present stem may denote the simple action of the verb in present time without regard to its continuance."

<sup>10</sup>A *Grammar of the Greek NT*, pp. 879ff.

<sup>11</sup>F. Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the New Testament* (trans. and rev. by C. L. Rogers; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 38.

<sup>12</sup>Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek NT*, p. 865.

<sup>13</sup>J. C. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), pp. 148ff. See also S. M. Reynolds, "The Zero Tense in Greek: A Critical Note," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 32 (1969): 68-72.



"follow Christ," and 14:2 where the powers are *energousin*, "working in him," the evident continuity still cannot be said to derive from the present indicative.

The actual use of the present indicative by Matthew, then, corroborates Robertson's contention that "action in progress" is not adequate to describe that linguistic phenomenon and that the context must decide in each instance.

Now in Matthew 19:9 Jesus answers the question addressed to him by the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" (vs. 3). It was a test question designed to probe his rabbinical lore and legal acumen, and his answer was expected to provide the Pharisees with further leverage against him. The question had a "cutting edge" on it as Antipas, in whose region they were at the moment, had only recently been divorced. The question was well suited for their test since rabbinical training would suppose that an answer would be based upon that collection of rabbinical lore which would later be collected in written form as the *Gittin*. As formulated, the question expected an interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it into her hand and sends her out of his house . . .

The *Gittin* clearly demonstrates that the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 24:1 is ambiguous both in syntax and expression.<sup>14</sup> The phrase *some indecency in her* had been interpreted in several ways, and therein lay the test.

Now Deuteronomy 24:1 did not create the requirement of a bill of divorce but does assume that such a process was already in operation at the time it was written. From such texts as Genesis 2:24, Ezekiel 16:8, Hosea 2:19, and Malachi 2:16, it is apparent that the God of Israel considers marriage to be a sacred covenant and that he hates divorce. Thus some rabbis disapproved strongly of divorce, as R. Eleazar ben Pedat, who noted that the very altar drops tears upon one who divorces the wife of his youth (*Gittin* 90). Others, however, were freer, such as R. Judah, who comments on Malachi 2:16, "If you hate her, put her away." Although many rabbis did disapprove of divorce and imposed various restraints upon it, Deuteronomy 24:1 did recognize a man's right to dismiss his wife.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>D. S. Margoliouth, "Christ's Answer to the Question About Divorce," *Expository Times*, 39 (1928): 272.

<sup>15</sup>See among others, *Ketuboth* 7:6,10; *Yebamoth* 4:12; 6:6; *Sotah* 6:1; also *Sirach* 25:13-26, apparently without claiming that she had committed adultery.



In the first century A.D., the schools of Hillel and Shammai differed as to what, in view of Deuteronomy 24:1, constituted legitimate reasons for divorce.<sup>16</sup> Shammai thought that divorce could be granted only for marital unfaithfulness. Hillel, on the other hand, asserted that even such a minor irritation as scorching the food was adequate grounds of divorce.<sup>17</sup> In *Gittin* 10 this view is based upon a loose interpretation of the phrase *some indecency* (*ervath dabar*) in Deuteronomy 24:1, and R. Akiba even inferred from *if then she finds no favor in his eyes* that a man might even divorce his wife if he found a more attractive woman. Whatever one's understanding of Deuteronomy 24:1,<sup>18</sup> it happened that Hillel's interpretation became the rabbinic norm. The question, then, "*Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?*" was actually a question as to whether Hillel's interpretation was correct. Obviously, if by eliciting from Jesus a statement as to which side he took in this rabbinic dispute over Deuteronomy 24:1 the Pharisees could involve him in a controversy, they would be well on their way toward nullifying his influence on the multitudes.<sup>19</sup>

In Jewish custom the only partner who could divorce was the man; the woman had no right to divorce her husband, although she could ask the court to compel her husband to grant her a divorce.<sup>20</sup> The cultural role of Jewish women in the marriage relationship was such that the power of a man to divorce his wife was practically unlimited and the grounds for divorce were several. In Jewish towns there was a court of three rabbis, the *beth din*, whose responsibility it was to hear ordinary marital disputes, but in the time of Christ it was unnecessary even to appear

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<sup>16</sup>*Gittin* 9:10; *Sifre Deut.* 269.

<sup>17</sup>Philo, *Spec. Leg.* III, 30, and Josephus, *Ant.* IV, 253, approximate the view of Hillel.

<sup>18</sup>See Jack P. Lewis, "An Exegesis of Deuteronomy 24:1-4," *Abilene Christian University Annual Bible Lectures* (Abilene, Tex.: ACU Bookstore, 1979), pp. 145-161.

<sup>19</sup>Against Kirsopp Lake, "The Earliest Christian Teaching on Divorce," *The Expositor*, 8th series, 10 (1916): 421, who states that it cannot be proved conclusively that Jesus mentioned the certificate of divorce because of the dispute between Hillel and Shammai, and views the statement as the work of a redactor. B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1927), p. 260, notes correctly that divorce was a burning question at this time. See also H. L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (2nd ed.; Munich: C. H. Beck, 1956), I, pp. 801-804.

<sup>20</sup>See *Ketuboth* 5:6; *Nedarim* 11:12; *Arakhin* 5:6. However, note also the flagrant violation of this Jewish custom by Salome, the daughter of Herod the Great, who divorced her husband, in Josephus, *Ant.* XV, vii, 10. 1 Cor. 7:10-16 reflects the Greek custom in which a woman could divorce her husband, although the note of Andre Bonnard, *Greek Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), I, p. 128, correctly relates the difficulties involved.



before this court if the divorce was by mutual consent.<sup>21</sup> In this case it was sufficient merely for the husband and wife to sign the bill of divorce in the presence of witnesses. In such cases there was no real necessity for the ground of separation to be specified.<sup>22</sup>

However, the wife's consent was not necessary for a divorce, nor did the divorce need rabbinic approval unless she contested the matter. The norm was that "a woman may be divorced with or without her will, but a man only with his will" (*Yebamoth* 14:1). If the wife objected, the matter was taken before the *beth din*. If adultery was alleged, the possible exemption from paying the *ketubah* and the Jewish intolerance of adultery meant that the case was referred to the highest court in Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> Apparently the *beth din* was more concerned with property settlement than with grounds for separation. Generally speaking, a Jewish man could divorce his wife for no grounds at all. The ambiguity of Deuteronomy 24:1 and the 24:4 statement that a man may not take a woman to be his wife after he has put her away were considerably abused.<sup>24</sup> So many liberties had been taken by the populace that even the masses recognized that divorce was frivolous and often carried out on the most trivial pretexts.<sup>25</sup>

Bearing in mind these features of Jewish society and opinion, one perceives that the Pharisaic question was not concerned with the legality of divorce, but with the phrase *for any cause*. The Pharisees designed to render Jesus vulnerable with either answer they expected (see Matthew 12:14; 15:1ff.; 16:1ff.). If he chose to support the Hillelic interpretation, he would be accused by the school of Shammai of laxity with respect to such passages as Genesis 2:24, Malachi 2:16; but, if he chose to support the interpretation of Shammai, he would be readily accused of narrow-

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<sup>21</sup>Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (New York: KATV, rep. 1967), p. 70.

<sup>22</sup>See further discussion in T. V. Fleming, "Christ and Divorce," *Theological Studies*, 24 (1963): 82; D. R. Mace, *Hebrew Marriage* (London: Epworth, 1953), pp. 184-200; Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, chap. 9 on "Jewish Divorce in the First Century"; and J. Pederson, *Israel* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, rep. 1959): I-II, pp. 60ff. The standard discussions in George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1927): II, pp. 110-127, and Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (trans. P. Christie; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1893): II, ii, pp. 120-125, remain vital to any discussion on this topic, and now one must add S. Safrai and M. Stern, eds., *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976): II, pp. 787ff.

<sup>23</sup>*Sotah* 1:4-6.

<sup>24</sup>See *Moed Katan* 1:7.

<sup>25</sup>Josephus, *Ant.* IV, viii, 23.



minded rigorism and would be clearly at variance with prevailing practice. Depending upon how one takes the *pasan*, "any," before the anarthrous noun, it could be that some expected him to be even stricter than Shammai.

The seriousness with which Jesus took this question is evidenced in his reply. Jesus responded, not by treating Deuteronomy 24:1 or referring to contemporary rabbinic discussion as had been anticipated, but by referring to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 and noting the ideal which predated the Mosaic concession. It is equally noteworthy that Jesus did not refer to Malachi 2:14ff. Ideally, Jesus said, they ought not to separate, and this ideal—not Deuteronomy 24:1—was God's intention for marriage. In verse 6, the teaching contained in the quotations of verses 4 and 5 is driven home.

The Pharisees, obviously irked by this turn of events, appealed to Deuteronomy 24:1 anyway, arguing that there Moses clearly sanctions divorce. The Pharisaic notion that Moses commanded the bill of divorce—ment which surfaces in verse 7 overlooks the salient fact that Moses did not command, but only permitted divorce. Jesus' reply in verse 8 leaves no doubt that while Moses permitted divorce, he did so only in view of man's hardness of heart. The *from the beginning, it has not been this way* reinforces the teaching of verses 4 and 5. Jesus put the entire subject on a different footing by stressing that it is none other than God who has joined the two together and made them complementary parts of a single entity. It can only be considered sacrilege for either to undo what God himself has done and for any human authority to recognize that sacrilege with official approval is abominable.<sup>26</sup>

Before treating the "exceptive clause" in verse 9, it is essential to address the textual problem in the Greek manuscript tradition. The older manuscripts, including the old Latin, old Syriac, and sahidic versions, are decidedly in support of the shorter text which reads, ". . . except for fornication and should marry another commits adultery." A second clause appears in later manuscripts which reads: ". . . except for fornication and should marry another commits adultery and whoever should marry the one who is put away commits adultery." This longer text, being the Byzantine reading, is read by the KJV. While it might be argued that a possible omission of the last clause in the older manuscripts could be due to homoeoteleuton in which a scribe accidentally skipped

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<sup>26</sup>Theodore Robinson, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1927), p. 159.

from *moichatai* at the end of the first clause to *moichatai* at the end of the second, the fact that Vaticanus and several other early witnesses read *moichatai* only once at the end of the second clause makes it more probable that the shorter text of Sinaiticus, *et al*, was expanded by copyists who accommodated the saying to the prevailing text of Matthew 5:32. In view of the strength of the external evidence and the transcriptional probability of the longer text being an assimilation of 5:32, the shorter reading printed in UBS Greek NT and Nestle-Aland 26th and read by RSV, NEB, and NIV has certain claim to represent the original text.<sup>27</sup>

Further, the "exceptive clause" *me epi porneia* is omitted apparently only by 1574 and no credible textual arguments can be made against the genuineness of the clause.<sup>28</sup> *Me epi porneia* of Sinaiticus and other early manuscripts is to be considered original and *parektos logou porneias*, "except on the ground of fornication," of Vaticanus, Bezae, and others is likewise an assimilation to 5:32 where the text is firm, as is the reading *poiei auten moicheuthenai*, "makes her commit adultery," of Vaticanus and Ephraemi rescriptus.

On the other hand, many recent commentators have regarded the "exceptive clause" as not having been a part of the saying as it was originally uttered, but as merely a community regulation which was inserted into the text at a later date.<sup>29</sup> Rightly recognizing the tendentious base upon which this *redaktionsgeschichtliche* theory rests, others have rejected this postulation and see the clause as original with Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (corr. ed.; London: U. B. S., 1975), p. 48, and G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 103.

<sup>28</sup>Josef Schmid, *Das Evangelium nach Matthaus* (Regensburg: F. Rustet, 1956), p. 103.

<sup>29</sup>See among others E. deWitt Burton, "The Biblical Teaching Concerning Divorce," *The Biblical World*, 29 (1907): 193ff.; E. Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 651; T. W. Manson, *The Teachings of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951), p. 200; G. Bornkamm, "Die Stellung des NT zur Ehescheidung," *Evangelische Theologie*, 7 (1947/48): 283ff.; J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1962), p. 413, fn. 160; and J. Dupont, *Mariage et divorce dans l'évangile* (Bruges: Desclee, 1959), pp. 82f.

<sup>30</sup>See Krister Stendahl, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (eds. M. Black and H. H. Rowley; London: T. Nelson, 1962), p. 777; H. G. Coiner, "Those 'Divorce and Remarriage' Passages," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 33 (1968): 373; and Fleming, *Theological Studies* (1963): 115f.



However, once the "exceptive clause" is admitted to be an authentic saying of Jesus, the understanding of the clause is open to a maze of interpretations.<sup>31</sup> Traditionally this clause has been interpreted by the Roman Catholic Church as allowing separation but not divorce,<sup>32</sup> while the Protestant viewpoint has been that the innocent party has the right to remarry.<sup>33</sup> Although a thoroughgoing critique of the various contemporary interpretations is beyond the scope of the present essay, several observations are pertinent to ascertaining whether any contextual understanding can be found to clarify the use of the present indicative *moichatai*.

In partial answer to the question of verse 3, Jesus' response in verses 4-6 altered the entire discussion, leading the Pharisees to shift from concern about the grounds for divorce to concern over a conflict between Genesis 2:24 (1:27) and Deuteronomy 24:1 which Jesus' answer seemed to imply. Jesus' response to this latest concern in verse 8 did have the effect of stifling the Pharisees, but the seeming contradiction in the Pentateuch remained, viz., how is it possible to reconcile Jesus' interpretation of Genesis 1:27; 2:24, "What God has joined together, let not man separate," with the fact that Moses did permit divorce, implicitly admitting the possibility of a man divorcing his wife legitimately?

The answer to both Pharisaic concerns is given by Jesus in verse 9, where the "exceptive clause" is consistent with Genesis 2:24 and Exodus 20:14, "You shall not commit adultery." In using *porneia* with reference to irresponsible sexual relationship, Jesus is not merely commenting on the indecency of Deuteronomy 24:1, nor does he side with the school of Shammai.<sup>34</sup> The term rather denotes unchastity per se, and the response

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<sup>31</sup>Note the useful summaries in E. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (trans. N. Smith; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), pp. 141-155; A. Mahoney, "A New Look at the Divorce Clauses in Mt. 5, 32 and 19, 9," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 30 (1968): 29, fn. 1; U. Holzmeister, "Die Streitfrage über die Ehescheidungstexte bei Matthäus 5:32; 19:9," *Biblica*, 26 (1945): 133-146; B. Vawter, "The Divorce Clauses in Mt. 5:32 and 19:9," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 16 (1954): 155-167; M. Zerwick, "De matrimonio et divortio in Evangelio," *Verbum Domini*, 38 (1960): 193-212. Patristic interpretations are discussed by H. Crouzel, "Le texte partistique de Matthieu v. 32 et xix. 9," *New Testament Studies*, 19 (1972): 98-119; and J. P. Arendzen, "Ante-Nicene Interpretations of the Sayings on Divorce," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 20 (1919): 230-241. *Bulletin*, 2 (1972): 80-86.

<sup>32</sup>See L. Sabourin, "The Divorce Clauses (Mt. 5:32; 19:9)," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 2 (1972?): 80-86.

<sup>33</sup>See R. J. Ehrlich, "The Indissolubility of Marriage as a Theological Problem," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23 (1970): 303.

<sup>34</sup>See Coiner, *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1968): 378.



of the disciples in verse 10 clearly shows that they took his "exceptive clause" in an absolute sense rather than merely as an agreement with the school of Shammai. *Porneia* translates what Jesus would have originally said in Aramaic, probably *ne'ap*, and suggests illicit sexual behavior antagonistic to the marriage union. Jesus' answer, then, to the questions of the Pharisees is that it is perfectly possible for a man to divorce his wife, provided Exodus 20:14 was broken by her. If a wife was unchaste, the intrinsic character of her marital commitment was already broken. To put away such a wife would not adulterate her, as she was already adulterated. To put away a wife for any other reason would be a clear violation of the intrinsic character of marriage and would constitute adultery if he remarries.

In the question-and-answer interchange between the Pharisees and Jesus, then, the point at issue is the true way to look at divorce. The use of the present indicative in discussing a general truth is called the "gnomic present."<sup>35</sup> and the limits of time on either side of the present moment are not defined.<sup>36</sup> Several occurrences of the "gnomic present" are in Matthew, as 7:17, "every good tree bears (*poiei*) good fruit."<sup>37</sup> This idiomatic use of the present tense to denote a general truth is as old as Aeschylus, *Ag.* 587, and Plato, *Phaed.* 58A. It is this "gnomic present" which occurs in *moichatai* in Matthew 19:9 when Jesus provides the general truth that "whoever divorces his wife except for unchastity and marries another commits adultery." In such a "gnomic present," or "present of general truth" (Smyth, pp. 421f.), continuity is not under consideration.

Arndt and Gingrich<sup>38</sup> observe, "the use of *an w.* subjunc. after relatives, the rel. clause forming virtually the protasis of a conditional sentence, 1) of the . . . present general type . . . w. pres. in apodosis, to

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<sup>35</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1959), p. 8.

<sup>36</sup>W. W. Goodwin, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb* (London: Macmillan, 1889), p. 9.

<sup>37</sup>G. B. Winer, *A Grammar of the Idiom of the New Testament* (7th ed.; Andover: W. F. Draper, 1870), p. 266, notes that Matt. 3:10, "every tree which brings not forth good fruit is cut," is not a "gnomic present" since these words are connected with "the axe is already lying at the root of the trees" and must therefore be seen as a "futuristic present," "will be cut." Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek NT*, p. 866 mentions Matt. 6:2 and 23:3 as good examples of the "gnomic present." G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as Used in the Apocalypse of St. John* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 250, mentions also Matt. 5:45 in this regard.

<sup>38</sup>*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (2nd ed. rev. by F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 48.



show that the condition and its results involve repeated action, regardless of the time element," and cite in this regard John 5:19; Mark 9:18; Acts 2:39, and James 4:4. This observation must not be misconstrued, however, to mean that the occurrence of the protasis necessarily results in continuing action in the apodosis. Of course, in moods other than the indicative, the present specifically denotes continuity, as in Matthew 7:12, "all things whatsoever you wish that men should do to you, thus you must continue to do (*poieite*, pres. imperative) to them," and Luke 9:4, "into whatever house you enter, remain (pres. imperat.) there and depart from (pres. imperat.) there." In such cases, it is the mood, rather than the presence of the particle *an* in a relative clause, which denotes continuity. The use of *an* in a relative clause with a present indicative in the apodosis necessitates contingency; however, one still must rely upon the context to determine whether any continuity is in focus. For instance, continuity can hardly be the focus of the present indicative in 1 John 3:22, "whatever we ask, we receive from him." In this and other NT usages, repetition involves both the protasis and the apodosis and continuity in the apodosis is not necessarily specified, thus "as often as we ask, we receive," not "whatever we ask, we continually receive." Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 11:26, "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you announce the death of the Lord," and Mark 9:18, "as often as the spirit seizes him, it throws him to the ground," and Matthew 23:16,18, as often as one swears by the gold of the temple or by the gift on the altar, he is obliged to fulfil his oath. Accordingly, the use of *an* with a relative clause followed by the present indicative *moichatai* in Matthew 19:9 means only that whenever and as often as the situation mentioned in the protasis occurs, adultery is committed in that act each time it occurs. This idiomatic construction does not necessitate continuity being involved in the apodosis; rather, it specifies that with each repetition of the protasis, there is a concomitant recurrence of the apodosis.

Thus it cannot be said that the present indicative in Matthew 19:9, or any other Greek text, "cannot mean other than continuous action," for any such argument blatantly disregards the several idiomatic uses of the present indicative in which continuity is not explicit. Greek syntax requires that each occurrence of the present indicative be understood in terms of its context to determine whether continuity is involved. The context of Matthew 9:3-12 involves a discussion of a general truth, and in Jesus' statement of that truth *moichatai* must be taken as a "gnomic present" in which continuity is not under consideration. Now continuity may or may not be involved, but it is not legitimate to appeal to the Greek present indicative to assert that it must be involved.